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# **TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY, A THEORY IN PROGRESS? THOUGHTS FROM A HABERMASIAN PERSPECTIVE**

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## **Abstract**

Mezirow borrows heavily from Habermas utilizing core concepts of his theory. However, this activity has serious shortcomings. This paper explores these shortcomings and contributes to the further development of the theory of transformative learning (TL). This paper focuses on three philosophical aspects of transformation theory. I (1) underline inaccuracies and misunderstandings of Habermas' ideas utilized by Mezirow. It will (2) identify theoretical shortcomings and problems in the work of Habermas transposed onto Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. And (3) finally I argue for a way forward for the theory of transformative learning to become a theory in progress.

Keywords: Transformative learning theory, Habermas, Mezirow, theory development

Mezirow (1991) echoes Habermas' (1971; 1984; 1987) ideas in his core concepts and theory. However, Mezirow's reception of Habermas' work have shortcomings, which I underpin and reflect upon in this paper, aiming to lift hindrances and contribute to further developments in Transformative Learning Theory (TL). I make here a systematic critical reflection on three philosophical aspects, of the theory's premises, and discuss the relations to one another. The goals are (i) to underline inaccuracy and partial use of Habermasian ideas; (ii) to identify theoretical voids and problems which go along with Habermas' ideas within the context of TL; and (iii) argue for a theory in progress.

## **Thoughts from a Habermasian Perspective: *Erkenntnisinteressen* and Domains of Learning**

The first critique centers around Mezirow's inaccurate and partial use of Habermas' ideas. This problem needs to be solved within TL in order to develop the theory further. In part, some of these unresolved issues have been identified within secondary literature (Collard & Law, 1989) but are far from being solved, adequately addressed, identified or discussed. The inconsistencies and contradictions that go along with Mezirow's reception of Habermas' ideas need to be addressed because they have remained unnoticed within the critical discourse on TL for almost three decades.

Some of the problems derive from within Habermas' work while others come along with Mezirow's use of Habermas' work in the context of TL. Mezirow adopts Habermas' idea to distinguish between instrumental, communicative and emancipatory interest and translates them into domains of learning: "A key proposition of transformative learning theory recognizes the validity of Habermas's fundamental distinction between instrumental and communicative learning" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59). This transfer is not conceivable without a conceptual narrowness, as Habermas' *Erkenntnisinteressen* or knowledge interests go far beyond what Mezirow conceptualizes as a domain of learning. This conceptual or terminological reduction goes along with a narrowed understanding of Habermas' ideas.

Mezirow focuses on the communicative interest, which he refers to as learning aiming at understanding what others mean while they are communicating with each other. Instrumental learning follows a different logic and emphasizes "improving prediction and

performance" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59). Following Habermas, the third interest, the emancipatory interest, has a derived status as distinguished from both other domains (Habermas, 1973, p. 400). It pertains to critical theory as a scientific field.

Mezirow locates TL explicitly within this third domain: "The Transformation Theory of adult learning is based upon an emancipatory paradigm" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 158). At the same time, Mezirow sets Habermas' distinction aside: "Although Habermas suggests a third learning domain, emancipation, transformation theory redefines this as the transformation process that pertains in both instrumental and communicative learning domains" (Mezirow, 2012, p. 78). It remains questionable, whether Mezirow does justice to the complex theoretical framework Habermas has built. There is also the question as to whether that was Mezirow's claim: "Although I have taken ideas from the work of Jurgen Habermas [sic], for example, I do not write from the perspective of the Frankfurt School with which he is associated, nor have I attempted to interpret systematically what Habermas or any other single theorist has to say about adult learning" (Mezirow, 1991c, pp. xiv-xv).

In any case, narrowing Habermas' ideas needs a critical examination. The problem with Mezirow's use of Habermas' work is not only that he incorporates interests in knowledge (Erkenntnisinteressen) as learning domains but he reduces the complexity of the relations among the different interests. In addition to that, it remains unclear, within the work of Habermas (1973), how the emancipatory interest in knowledge pertains to the communicative and or instrumental interest in knowledge, according to Ottmann (2012, p. 105).

Obviously, there is a direct relationship between Habermas' work and Mezirow's TL but this relationship is theoretically underdeveloped. In addition to that, Mezirow (e.g., 1991) refers to different writings from Habermas (1973; 1981; 1984). Collard and Law criticize Mezirow's "selective interpretation and adaption of Habermas" (Collard & Law, 1989, p. 102). And, even more importantly, Collard and Law reflect on the shift in Habermas' work and the problems that go along with Mezirow's use of his ideas: "As Habermas shifts the focus of his investigations, Mezirow also moves away from a philosophy of consciousness towards a theory of communication" (Collard & Law, 1989, p. 101). Mezirow's work clearly lacks a critical reflection on this shift: "Mezirow does not address the difficulties created by the shift in Habermas' position and attention" (Collard & Law, 1989, p. 104). Until now, these inconsistencies and incompatibilities have not been addressed within Mezirow's work and partially limit further theory development. [indent first line] Your first heading will likely be related to context, prior literature, rationale, purpose etc. Or it could relate to something entirely different.

### **Thoughts from a Habermasian Perspective: Reflective Discourse and Ideal Speech Situations**

Discourse, in the context of transformation theory, is that specialized use of dialogue devoted to searching for a common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or belief. This involves assessing reasons advanced by weighing the supporting evidence and arguments and by examining alternative perspectives (Mezirow, 2012, p. 78).

Mezirow's notion of reflective discourse is based on an idea which was originally developed by Jürgen Habermas (1981a; 1981b; 1984; 1987) in his magnum opus *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Two considerable problem dimensions are derived from incorporating Habermas' ideas: (1) There are voids within Habermas' work and (2) problematic aspects which result from the reception of Habermas' work within TL. The purpose of this section is to discuss several of these problems.

The first difficulty arises from Habermas' notion of discourse and communication. According to Habermas (1973, p. 291), the unconscious remains beyond discourse, and it is by definition not a part of discourse. This results in a theoretical void within TL which still needs to be addressed. The role of the unconscious is inadequately theoretically developed within Mezirow's conception of TL and needs to be adequately addressed.

Habermas' understanding of discourse goes hand in hand with the idea of an ideal speech situation or ideal speech conditions. Mezirow (1991, pp. 77-78; 2012, p. 80) reflects similar conditions explicitly without a reference to the work of Jürgen Habermas. What is referred to as Mezirow's ideal speech conditions within the debate on TL, has its origin in the writings of Habermas (e.g., 1981a; 1981b). Collard and Law made us aware of that aspect almost three decades ago: "It will be recalled that Habermas' ideal conditions for discourse constitute Mezirow's ideal conditions of self-directed learning" (Collard & Law, 1989, p. 104). In contrast to Mezirow's work, Habermas' conceptualization of these conditions is more elaborated and differentiated. Habermas differentiates between communicative, constative, representative, and regulative speech acts, to mention only one aspect (Habermas, 1981a, pp. 177-178).

Another problematic aspect, which is central to transformative learning as a theory of adult learning, arises out of the implementation of a sociological theory that is not concerned with adult learning. Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action is not particularly concerned with learning and the concept of learning is not only theoretically underdeveloped but to a large extent conceptually overlooked. It remains questionable if, and how, learning processes can be situated in a non-hierarchical or authority free context. As Collard and Law already have mentioned, "[s]uch discourse requires a symmetrical relationship between participants, yet that this symmetry needs to be fostered through perspective transformation implies an asymmetrical relationship (Collard & Law, 1989, S. 104). Learning as well as transformative learning is somehow guided learning. It is questionable if this is compatible with Habermas' ideal speech conditions if discourse is where transformative learning is located. Furthermore, Habermas' conception of an ideal speech situation, as a key element within TL, is "theoretically based, with little support from empirical research" (Taylor, 1997, p. 54).

There is a more general, fundamental dilemma which arises out of Mezirow's conception of promoting TL through fostering ideal speech conditions. This dilemma pertains to the very possibility of creating an ideal speech situation. Habermas himself says that the expression 'ideal speech situation' is delusive, insofar as it suggests a concrete form of life (Habermas, 1985). The idea of rational or reflective discourse is a counterfactual idea. We have to ask if there is a possibility to reconcile the ideal and the real speech situations. Bauman (2012) questions the very possibility of achieving a consensus, even a tentative one, which is a prerequisite of both Habermas' and Mezirow's speaking about discourse. Following Bauman, there is only one option in achieving a thinkable consensus, the shared acceptance of heterogeneity of non-conformity (Bauman, 2012). In accepting the impossibility of an ideal speech situation, we have to ask how to promote TL. "[T]here needs to be continued exploration into the practice of fostering transformative learning, recognizing the limits of promoting ideal practice" (Taylor, 1997, p. 55). These limits need to be addressed while our current understanding of how to foster TL needs to be broadened. This includes the idea of how individuals and communities can create "good enough" public spaces.

### **Thoughts from a Habermasian Perspective: Possibilities and Limitations**

The third aspect is concerned with one of the most fundamental tensions within TL, the distinction between personal growth and social action. The dilemma inherent in the use of Habermas' work becomes apparent here: "He [Mezirow] wants to situate transformative learning within an emancipatory framework, but at the same time his model seems to emphasize personal transformation to a greater extent than social transformation" (Taylor,

1998, p. 25). According to Rorty (1989), Habermas and his notion of discourse belong to the public sphere and not to the private sphere. The private sphere is not addressed by Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* and is irrelevant for his purposes. The implementation of Habermas' work with its specific orientation inherent in his notion of discourse becomes problematic within the context of TL. It becomes apparent with respect to Mezirow's differentiation of distorted assumptions. He identifies several areas, such as epistemic, sociolinguistic and psychological premise distortions (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 123-143). With regard to the latter, it becomes evident that the personal dimension, which belongs to the private sphere, is theoretically underexplored in Habermas' notion of discourse (1981a, 1981b) since it is not at the very heart of his theory. Both dimensions need to be placed at the center of TL on equal footing and are highly relevant for future theory development.

One possible solution is to focus on different aspects within the work of Habermas (1973) which put an emphasis on the personal dimension. Those aspects allow us to build bridges between individual and community transformation. At the same time, we are able to fill a theoretical void within Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (see Eschenbacher, 2017, Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020). Self-reflection is – according to Habermas – no lonesome process (Habermas, 1973, p. 290), and requires intersubjectivity. Mezirow himself distinguishes between intrapersonal and interpersonal processes within his notion of TL: "To take the perspective of another involves an intrapersonal process, drawing on the information one has about the speaker to form a model of the other" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59-60). He continues: "Perspective taking also involves an interpersonal dimension, using feedback to adapt messages to the other's perspective" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59-60). In order to do justice to intra and interpersonal processes within TL on a theoretical and conceptual level, we can focus on different aspects within Habermas' work (Habermas, 1973, p. 179).

Following Habermas, *life stories* constitute themselves on a *vertical* and *horizontal* level. The latter refers to the interpersonal dimension, while the former is constituted by an individual's life experiences in a temporal context (Habermas, 1973, p. 196-197). Focusing on these aspects within Habermas' writings allows us not solely to fill a theoretical void but to strengthen the tension within TL, Mezirow's in-the-middle-of-the-road position that emerged from the original study: "A woman becomes a *transformation learner* when she realizes how the culture and her own attitudes have conspired to define and delimit her self-conception, her lifestyle, and her options in terms of a set of prescribed, stereotypic roles. As a result of recognizing these taken-for-granted cultural expectations and how they have shaped the way she thinks and feels about herself and her relationships, the transformation learner comes to identify her personal problem as a common one and a public issue" (Mezirow, 1978, p. 15). This tension between personal growth and social action can then be used as a new starting point for theory development.

### **Critical Reflection**

Besides the possibility to extend transformation theory's understanding of communication (Mezirow) by paying more attention to different aspects within Habermas' writings, it became apparent that there is a need to reflect critically on the theory's basic premises. Interestingly both Habermas and Mezirow discuss one dimension explicitly and another in an implicit way:

While Habermas recognizes the personal dimension of processes of transformation more in an implicit way, his theory is explicitly concerned with the public sphere. Mezirow, in contrast, locates his theory of transformative learning implicitly in the public sphere as a result of the centrality of discourse which is at the heart of his theory.

At the same time the theory of transformative learning emphasizes the personal dimension to a greater extent. Mezirow refers to the "reciprocity between democratic theory and transformation theory" (Mezirow, 2012, p. 91). Following Habermas, personal

development is a prerequisite for communicative action while an in-depth exploration of personal growth is missing in his work. According to Habermas, society has to guarantee enough possibilities to enable people to participate in discourse.

Both, Habermas' and Mezirow's lines of argument or notions of processes of transformation are on the opposite side of one continuum. One might go so far as to say that Habermas sees personal growth, development, or maturity as a prerequisite for processes of change, while Mezirow completes the task that Habermas within his *Theory of Communicative Action*. Even though Mezirow was inspired and greatly influenced by Habermas' writings, one might say that from a learning perspective, he is addressing a theoretical void within Habermas' work.

In a broader context, an ongoing critical and theoretical review needs to reflect on TL's philosophical premises in order to go back to a *theory in progress*. In addition to reflecting critically on every philosophical underpinning, there is a need to reflect on the relationship *between* them and possible incompatibilities in Critical Social Theory, Humanism and Constructivism. Therefore, this paper can be seen as an invitation to go back to a *theory in progress* for further theory development.

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